



March 4, 2025

## **Making Our Impact as Disciples in the World**

**By The Rev. J. Randolph Alexander, Jr.**

As I write this, I am knee-deep in the process of completing our annual Parochial Report, a document which goes to the Diocese and is then passed on to the national Episcopal Church. I'm sure aspects of the data are then shared with the international Anglican Communion. The Parochial Report deals with the financial life of congregations, along with all aspects of membership, the numbers of baptisms, weddings, funerals, confirmations, ministries, and those in attendance.

I dread preparing these reports. It's like preparing one's taxes, requiring guesses and approximations, even when trying one's best to convey a realistic picture of parish life. Yet, I do understand the need for this annual exercise, as it gives the Church a clearer picture of what is going on in congregational life.

This year the report has a new direction and seems to be moving away from gathering data only related to our own parish gatherings for worship and moving towards a more holistic examination of the total effect of the parish.

Another way of asking this question might be to consider how many lives we touch; how many people we bless.

This broader approach includes those who watch services online, the relationships we have with all of our tenants, and those individuals and groups who benefit from our outreach. In Immanuel's case, this would include groups that meet at Immanuel, such as the Boy Scouts and Alcoholics Anonymous.

This makes me think about the total effect *each one of us has*, as children of God and as followers of Jesus. Considering our total impact in the world would move us well beyond our closest family members and friends. Our total impact in the world would include co-workers and neighbors, long-lost friends and acquaintances. It would include people with whom we interact on social media. Our total impact in the world would also include how we interact with others at the grocery store, for example, with workers and other customers, or in line at the Post Office or gas pump, or as we are driving on the interstate.

In other words, *how are we in the world?* And how are we making a witness and a difference for Jesus, likely in more ways than we have even considered?

I find this to be both an exciting perspective and also a formidable responsibility. What about the times we are less than courteous to strangers, or to the server at a restaurant or drive-through, or to the Uber driver? Can we even control all of this on our own? Aren't we just too fallible? After all, we can't always be on our best behavior.

To begin living into this broader consciousness of our effect on God's other children and the unique ministry to which we are all called, we have to take some time for inventory. In that ongoing inventory we might take note of the persistent noisemakers in our lives: challenging people, troubling issues, recurrent anxieties, current events, and so much more.

It might also be helpful to keep reminders of when we have really had a Godly impact on someone else. For example, I have a stack of notes I keep. I try to refer to these once in a while, especially in moments of frustration or even despair, when I am wondering whether my ministry is really making a

difference. These thank you notes, photos, and mementos help me to remember, to give thanks, and to start fresh yet again.

Another concrete thing followers of Jesus can do to examine our impact is to consider the good we are *already* doing in many areas of our lives, and then to connect those good things explicitly to our faith. Coaching your child's soccer team, volunteering at an animal shelter, leading efforts towards recycling, writing one's elected representatives, and so much more, could all be viewed as ministries if they spring from our faith and our desire to make a difference in God's world.

For the Christian, these actions can easily move beyond simply being good things to do and towards real-life expressions of ministry.

Sometimes our Vestry reads books or articles that we discuss together at our meetings. A few years ago we read a couple of books by Rowan Williams, a renowned theologian, and former Archbishop of Canterbury. In one of those books, *Being Disciples*, the Archbishop writes movingly of this ever-broadening sense of what being a disciple means in this world:

“We look at one another as Christians with expectancy – an aspect of discipleship that is not always easy to hold to. Yet it can't be said too often that the first thing we ought to think of when in the presence of another Christian individual or Christian community is: what is Christ giving me through this person, this group? Given that we may not always see eye to eye with other Christians we mix with, that can be hard work (and no doubt it's at least equally hard work for them looking at us). But, nonetheless, Jesus has brought us together precisely so that we approach one another with that degree of expectancy. It doesn't mean that you will agree with everything the other Christian says or does; simply that you begin by asking 'What is Jesus Christ giving me here and now?' Never mind the politics, the hidden agenda, or anything else of that kind; just ask that question and it will move you forward a tiny bit in discipleship. Can we live in a Church characterized by expectancy towards one another of that kind? It would be a very deeply biblical and gospel-shaped experience of the Church if we could.” (*Being Disciples*, pages 8-9).

It's almost like we should each do an individual Parochial Report! Perhaps this question about living into our discipleship and our overall effect on others and on God's world could be one we bring with us into this season of Lent. Let it be so!